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Concerning

Forest and Rangeland Health in Nevada's Great Basin

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Ely, Nevada

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to be with you today to discuss the health of the forests and rangelands in Nevada's Great Basin. My name is Jack Troyer. I am the Regional Forester for the Intermountain Region of the Forest Service. With me today is Bob Vaught, Forest Supervisor of the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest, Pat Irwin, Ely District Ranger, and Dr. Robin Tausch, Research Scientist and Project Leader for the Rocky Mountain Research Station.

At the outset, Mr. Chairman, I want to let you know that actions taking place back in Washington, D.C. are of great interest to us here in the Intermountain Region. The President's Healthy Forests Initiative and H.R. 1904, the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003, will help us to improve the health and vitality of the national forests and grasslands.

The Intermountain Region encompasses 32 million acres of National Forests and Grasslands in parts of six states: western Wyoming, southern Idaho, Utah, Nevada, and portions of California and Colorado. Our mission is to manage these lands for multiple-use while sustaining health, diversity, and productivity. Here in Nevada, the Forest Service manages over five million acres of forest and rangelands for a multitude of purposes including livestock grazing, mining, harvesting of forest products, recreation, and watershed protection.

Earlier this year, Chief Bosworth described, four threats that confront the national forests and grasslands: fire and fuel build-up, invasive species, the loss of open spaces and unmanaged recreation. I will briefly explain why each of these issues is a threat to National Forests in this Region. I will also highlight some of the efforts the Forest Service in partnership with the local, state and other federal agencies is taking to address the threats.

Fire and Fuels

One threat to National Forests is fire and fuels. Many here will remember the fire seasons of 1999 and 2000 when Nevada experienced many large wildland fires.

The underlying issue is that so many of our forests have become overgrown and unhealthy. Additionally, Nevada has experienced five straight years of well below average precipitation. In this portion of the Great Basin, we have the specific problem of pinyon and juniper trees encroaching upon rangelands. Dr. Tausch has done extensive research into historical distribution and density of pinyon and juniper species in the Intermountain West. Today, we have two to three times more pinyon/juniper woodlands than 100 years ago and the potential for additional encroachment by pinyon/juniper is high. Dr. Tausch believes that prior to the

European settlement; woodland species were primarily confined to rocky ridges or surfaces where sparse vegetation limited fire. Pinyon/juniper woodlands now occupy more productive sites with deeper well-drained soils. Replacement of the original sagebrush communities by pinyon and juniper species is largely attributed to the reduced occurrence of fire. These dense tree-canopied woodlands are now susceptible to intense crown fires, which can lead to the dominance of exotic, undesirable species such as cheatgrass.

So what can we do? It will take active management and lots of work to treat lands that currently need help. We can successfully treat by various methods particularly fire, the early to middle successional stages of pinyon/juniper encroachment, when woodlands contain understories of native shrubs and forbs. In addition, we need to recognize that burned areas may present land managers with the opportunity to restore forests and rangelands to more natural fire regimes that can complement or reduce fuels reduction management efforts.

The Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest is working to reduce the build-up of hazardous fuels on National Forest System lands. Many acres will be treated in the coming years with much of the work centered in the wildland/urban interface at locations such as Holbrook Junction, Jacks Valley, Mt. Rose, Shantytown and elsewhere. In Ely, the District Ranger has successfully used the new categorical exclusion procedures to quickly allow for the treatment of 100 acres of National Forest along a high voltage power line.

The healthy forest restoration work that is accomplished in Nevada is done cooperatively with Nevada Division of Forestry (NDF), the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and local governments - efforts that cross administrative boundaries for the purpose of improving the health of the forest and rangelands. To assist the State of Nevada with hazardous fuel reduction work, the Forest Service awarded in grants, 3.7 million dollars over the last three years to NDF to complete work on non-federal lands throughout the state.

Invasive Species

The second threat to National Forests and Grasslands is the spread of unwanted invasive species. We used to focus just on noxious weeds. Now we know that the issue is far broader. Invasive species also include animals and even disease-causing pathogens such as West Nile virus. Invasive species are species that evolved in one place and wound up in another, where the ecological controls they evolved with are missing. They take advantage of their new surroundings to crowd out or kill off native species. In the process, they might alter key ecological processes, such as hydrology or fire return intervals.

In the Intermountain West, some of the most troubling invasive plants are cheatgrass, knapweed, yellow star thistle, salt cedar, leafy spurge, and purple loosestrife. These plants soak up water and take up space, driving out the native plants. Areas infested with weeds like leafy spurge lose almost all their forage value for both livestock and wildlife.

What can we do to stop the spread of invasive species? Prevention and control work best, but only if they are done across ownerships on a landscape level. In the last two years, Nevada has formed 23 Cooperative Weed Management Areas that focus on the prevention and control efforts needed to stop the spread. Through State and Private Forestry grants, the Forest Service has contributed \$268,000 to support Cooperative Weed Management Areas in Nevada that work across administrative boundaries and land ownerships.

Loss of Open Space / Resource Land Conversion

The third threat to National Forests is the loss of open space through land use conversion and development.

How does that affect the nation's forests and grasslands? Years ago, the national forests were buffered by miles of rural landscape. Now they are increasingly part of the wildland/urban interface. People are increasingly living close to or adjacent to National Forests. Demands for services are growing, and so is the challenge of fire protection.

In addition, the impacts of land conversion and fragmentation can be significant. We are losing open areas of range that are important as wildlife habitat and as resource lands for livestock grazing.

When the Forest Service first started managing the land a century ago, overgrazing was a huge problem. Over time, we improved things by working closely with the ranchers. The ecological payoff has been significant. Keeping the land remaining whole and healthy benefits both wildlife and livestock.

Now we face a different issue. Our population is growing, particularly in the West—Nevada remains one of the fastest growing states in the nation. Developers target the privately held bottomlands adjacent to National Forests. Millions of acres of open range have been converted to ranchettes and other residential uses. New challenges occur with the creation of new wildland/urban interface areas, resulting in the possible loss of access to National Forest System land, and the loss of ecological integrity of the land.

How can the Forest Service contribute to solutions? One way is to keep working forests and ranches in operation. The Forest Service has some good programs for that. Most significant of these is the Forest Legacy program that provides cost share funds to the state for use in acquiring conservation easements from willing land owners. We are committed to working with ranchers individually, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach to allotment management. We work with ranchers and the Natural Resources Conservation Service to utilize that agency's various programs. We are doing everything within our means to deploy more range management specialists on the ground to build relationships with permittees so they can work together to solve problems. Grazing on National Forests and Grasslands is part of the solution, not part of the problem.

Unmanaged Outdoor Recreation

The fourth threat comes from unmanaged outdoor recreation. In my years with the Forest Service, I have seen tremendous growth in the number of people recreating on National Forest land and in the types of activities in which people engage. Last year, the Intermountain Region had 22 million visits, which is just phenomenal. Recreationists participated in traditional activities such as camping, fishing, hiking, and driving for pleasure, and some rather recent recreational activities such as mountain-bike riding, four-wheeling, snowboarding, and geo-caching – sort of a modern-day treasure hunt. The number of people and recreational activities will continue to grow. The challenge for the Forest Service is to accommodate the needs of recreationists while reducing resource damage to sensitive meadows and riparian areas and preventing conflict among different user groups.

Peavine Mountain, located in Reno's backyard offers many recreational opportunities. The Forest Service, Washoe County, and the City of Reno have cooperatively embarked upon a course of action to manage this mountain so as to ensure people are safe while recreating and not causing undue damage to the land. Here in Ely, the Duck Creek Travel Plan started with local citizens asking the White Pine Board of County Commissioners to address problem OHV travel in the Duck Creek Basin. The Forest Service and the BLM, in cooperation with the county, are completing an environmental analysis on recommendations made by the county's Coordinated Resource Management group, which address the OHV use and misuse.

I want the American people to recreate outdoors. It gives them a stake in the land. It gives them a sense of place. It helps them understand why we in the Forest Service are so passionate about the land—why we think it is worth conserving.

Conclusion

In closing, let me say that we will continue to address that which threatens the health of the forest and rangelands. To be successful we must continue to work with all who have a stake in the management of National Forests. So much of the healthy forest restoration work that is accomplished in Nevada must be done on a landscape scale, crossing administrative boundaries.

This concludes my prepared remarks. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.